

November 2003

1.12

Personal Essay

Benchmarks

In personal essays, students make connections between experiences and ideas. This is evident when students:

PreK-4:

- A. Reflect on personal experience, or the experience of an imagined character, using the patterns of cause/effect, comparison, and classification.

5 -6:

- AA. Relate personal experiences to concepts patterns, and ideas;
- B. Trace the process of reflection, making connection between thought and experience; and
- C. Establish a commonplace, concrete occasion as a context for the reflection.

9-12:

- D. Maintain a thoughtful voice and style.

5TH GRADE BENCHMARKS

The Gods of the Past	5 / 3
The “Merry”-Go-Round Ride	5 / 3
Who Am I?	5 / 3
Life Does End	4 / 3
Play Reflection	3 / 3
My Teddy Bear	2 / 3
This is a sad event	1 / 2
My Life in the Fith Grade	1 / 3

VERMONT NEW STANDARDS RUBRIC FOR PERSONAL ESSAY: WRITING TO EXPLORE AND ANALYZE

Standard 1.12 In personal essays, students make connections between experience and ideas.

Criteria	Score Point 5 Exceeds the Standard	Score Point 4 Accomplished Writing	Score Point 3 Intermediate Writing	Score Point 2 Basic Writing	Score Point 1 Limited Writing	Score Point 0
OCCASION FOR REFLECTION Something <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen • Read • Overheard • Experienced 	Score point 5 meets all the criteria listed in score point 4 and offers even more. This paper memorably presents the occasion for reflection, often deals with fine detail of the naturalist or autobiographer setting up a reflection that is exceptionally thoughtful and convincing.	Presents occasion through the effective use of concrete details; sensory language; narrative accounts, using pacing, dialogue, action; and/or quotations (purpose). May recount single stimulus or a web of related experiences or observations (organization & detail).	May be brief or the occasion may dominate (purpose). May take the form of a preconceived generalization to be explained rather than explored.	May take the form of autobiographical illustrations or a single incident (purpose). Reflection may be a simple statement of belief or may be implicitly embedded in the title or topic sentence (context).	Occasion for reflection may be omitted or presented only in the title (purpose). May be little or no evidence of reflection (context).	Score Point 0 Unscorable There is no evidence of an attempt to write a personal essay.
REFLECTION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring • Analyzing 	The paper presents ideas in an original fashion, using imaginative yet precise language in its attention to subtleties of thought. This paper often shows a metaphoric use of language. In some notable papers, the writer's presentation of the occasion is at the same time a reflection; here the reflection is implicit, embedded in a way that leads the reader from the specific to the abstraction that underlies it.	Is thoughtful, convincing, insightful, exploratory. Reflection is firmly grounded in the occasion (context). Expresses integral connection between experience and ideas (purpose). Analyzes ideas by looking at them from multiple angles and/or moving through successively deeper layers of meaning (detail).	May be thoughtful but predictable, grounded in occasion rather than reflection (context). Establishes connection between experience and ideas (purpose). Generally takes the form of reasons or supporting statements for a preconceived generalization; may be convincing, but not exploratory (detail).	May be limited to superficial generalizations.	May be in the form of a simple, obvious statement.	
ELABORATION STRATEGIES, DETAILS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using specific, concrete details • Comparing, contrasting • Naming, describing • Reporting conversation • Reviewing the history • Explaining possibilities • Creating a scenario 	These papers reveal a deepening insight, sometimes expressed as wonder, and may end with a conclusion but without a sense of conclusiveness.	Explores an abstraction in both personal and general reflection (detail). Uses a variety of strategies both in the occasion and throughout the reflection (detail). Is attentive to the particulars of observation, recounting them effectively as a way of grounding the reflection.	Shows purposeful use of strategies for elaboration (detail). Uses some detail and sensory language (detail).	Shows little purposeful use of strategies for elaboration (detail). May be limited to lists of details or of generalizations.	No attempt to elaborate or may attempt to elaborate by repetition of initial statement.	
COHERENCE AND STYLE		Achieves coherence through natural progression of ideas, not through application of external organizational patterns (organization). Uses precise and appropriate language (voice & tone).	Coherent, often relying on external organizational patterns rather than lines of thought. Uses predictable patterns, word choices, details.	May have lapses in coherence. Stays generally on the topic but may have some internal digressions. Uses simple, generic language.	Lapses in coherence, lack of organization. Simple, generic language with no sentence variety.	

This rubric is adapted from materials created by the New Standards Project.

The Gods of the Past

One night in April on our trip to Mexico I found myself looking up at a navy-blue sky full of the brightest stars I'd ever seen. During this time I wondered, "What are stars really made of?" this soon paced my mind, but when I was asked to write this paper I thought back to this dazzling moment.

"What do you think stars are?" Are they great balls of fire or angels' lamps? Are they the lights of heaven or fireflies caught in the sky? When I think about stars I think of loved ones or great people in this world that have died. They're all looking down upon us and helping us through good and bad times.

I understand that people do die. Even wonderful people die. They just go on, up to those stars. Watching over us when we most need them.

Even though we're always hoping, always wishing that we'll live forever, it's really for the better that we die. It's just the cycle of life.

Recently my grandmother was diagnosed with stage three ovarian cancer and has been extremely sick for over a year. It's nice to think that she'll be up there when she dies. Always helping me with my problems, always looking down on me like she always did except transformed into a star. When she dies it may seem like she's gone forever, but not really. She'll be up there, somewhere. Up with everyone else, even me someday.

Everyone's a star really. We all have some of that glowing in us somewhere. We'll all be up there someday, using that bit of gold to help us keep on shining forever.

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 5 / 3

The Gods of the Past

One night in April on our trip to Mexico I found myself looking up at a navy-blue sky full of the brightest stars I'd ever seen. During this time I wondered, "What are stars really made of?" this soon paced my mind, but when I was asked to write this paper I thought back to this dazzling moment.

Occasion for reflection

Reflection grounded in occasion

"What do you think stars are?" Are they great balls of fire or angels' lamps? Are they the lights of heaven or fireflies caught in the sky? When I think about stars I think of loved ones or great people in this world that have died. They're all looking down upon us and helping us through good and bad times.

Reflects on meaning of stars by looking at them from multiple angles

I understand that people do die. Even wonderful people die. They just go on, up to those stars. Watching over us when we most need them.

Reflection begins to move through successively deeper layers of meaning

Even though we're always hoping, always wishing that we'll live forever, it's really for the better that we die. It's just the cycle of life.

Recently my grandmother was diagnosed with stage three ovarian cancer and has been extremely sick for over a year. It's nice to think that she'll be up there when she dies. Always helping me with my problems, always looking down on me like she always did except transformed into a star. When she dies it may seem like she's gone forever, but not really. She'll be up there, somewhere. Up with everyone else, even me someday.

Ties deepening reflection/understanding to own personal experience

Insightful

Everyone's a star really. We all have some of that glowing in us somewhere. We'll all be up there someday, using that bit of gold to help us keep on shining forever.

Concludes with an abstraction that has emerged naturally out of the preceding reflection

Score Point 5

In this piece the writer begins with a brief reference to an experience, looking at the stars one night. She explores the meaning of the stars from several angles, then begins to reflect on the stars through successively deeper layers of meaning. From this new point, she returns to her own experience with her dying grandmother and brings this experience to her new understanding of the stars. Her conclusion synthesizes the entire thought process she has gone through, arriving at a new level of understanding.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

The “Merry”-Go-Round Ride

Six years ago I was at a fair. I was having a good time, but little did I know that my fun was about to change. I decided to go on a merry-go-round. When I got on and the worker closed the gate the merry-go-round started moving. I started falling into a “standby” phase, meaning that I was almost catching Z’s. After a few minutes it seemed that God was getting bored of me being happy. This is how he tweaked that. He made the merry-go-round start to fall apart. I didn’t notice the merry-go-round shaking until I started falling off. It seemed that the whole time I was falling was like slow-mo movie called “God Plays with J_____’s Life.” I was about to hit my head and get a concussion, when suddenly, a hand reached out in front of me and grabbed me as the merry-go-round collapsed beneath me. I thought that the hand was God saving me from the disaster that he made, only to look up and see my mom and dad’s petrified faces. When I looked at the ruins of what used to be the merry-go-round I nearly fainted. I could have been in those ruins if my dad didn’t grab me.

If I had been more alert I probably would have gotten off by my self. I would have been prepared. My heart was pounding in my throat and I nearly fainted. This event wasn’t like any other event you could even imagine. How many people have merry-go-rounds break up under their feet? This event is special to me because I could learn to be prepared from other times but I feel that it is best to learn these lessons at a young age so that it makes the rest of my life easier. It may have been scary but if it was something boring then I’d probably just blow it off and forget the lesson it taught me. Scary events are easier to learn lessons from and remember for future references. This event doesn’t touch me as much emotionally as it does mentally. I can’t get over the fact that I could have broken something or even be killed. Luck plus a scary event equals lessons to learn.

This event taught me to be more alert in the things I do. Things in life happen, but people don't always pay attention to the lessons they teach. Other peoples' lives can have the same thing happen and learn the same lessons as others. In this event there were other people going through the same thing that I was. Life teaches us many things and this is one of them. This may connect to a similar event that might have happened hundreds of years ago. People from the past, present, and future may all go through the same event in a different way. I may seem to be talking nonsense, but this event does connect to life in general. I'll bet that every person on planet Earth will go through an even that teaches them something. Weather or not they listen to the lesson that life is trying to teach them is a choice that they will have to make.

Summing up, I'd say that this event taught me not to look at what was happening, but instead to look at what might happen in the future, to always look ahead and not behind, to be prepared. In the future if I find myself in a situation with possibilities of me being endangered, I will know to think of what might happen and be prepared in case it does happen. I hope that others are also listening to the lessons that life teaches them too.

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 5 / 3

The “Merry”-Go-Round Ride

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Establishes occasion for reflection

Metaphoric reflection even within description of occasion

If I had been more alert I probably would have gotten off by my self. I would have been prepared. My heart was pounding in my throat and I nearly fainted. This event wasn’t like any other event you could even imagine. How many people have merry-go-rounds break up under their feet? This event is special to me because I could learn to be prepared from other times but I feel that it is best to learn these lessons at a young age so that it makes the rest of my life easier. It may have been scary but if it was something boring then I’d probably just blow it off and forget the lesson it taught me. Scary events are easier to learn lessons from and remember for future references. This event doesn’t touch me as much emotionally as it does mentally. I can’t get over the fact that I could have broken something or even be killed. Luck plus a scary event equals lessons to learn.

Writer begins to reflect on what he learned from the experience

This event taught me to be more alert in the things I do. Things in life happen, but people don’t always pay attention to the lessons they teach. Other peoples’ lives can have the same thing happen and learn the same lessons as others.

Insightful

Writer continues to reflect, moving through successively deeper/broader layers of meaning

In this event there were other people going through the same thing that I was. Life teaches us many things and this is one of them. This may connect to a similar event that might have happened hundreds of years ago. People from the past, present, and future may all go through the same event in a different way. I may seem to be talking nonsense, but this event does connect to life in general. I'll bet that every person on planet Earth will go through an even that teaches them something.

Weather or not they listen to the lesson that life is trying to teach them is a choice that they will have to make.

Summing up, I'd say that this event taught me not to look at what was happening, but instead to look at what might happen in the future, to always look ahead and not behind, to be prepared. In the future if I find myself in a situation with possibilities of me being endangered, I will know to think of what might happen and be prepared in case it does happen. I hope that others are also listening to the lessons that life teaches them too.

Score Point 5

In this piece the writer starts from an experience, the collapse of the merry-go-round, as an occasion for reflection. He develops the essay, from experience to personal reflection to broader reflection, moving through successively deeper/broader layers of meaning. Within this, the writer shows flashes of deeper insight as well ("God got bored of me being happy" and "Luck plus a scary event equals lessons to learn"). This level of insight as well as this thoughtfulness of reflection are "5" qualities.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

Who Am I?

Every summer I go to Gloucester, Massachusetts. I have many friends there who make me feel more like myself.

When I am with them we act, sing, dance, and much more. When I do this I feel like that's all there is.

Every summer I start to wonder. Who am I? Am I the performing arts type? When I am home people seem too different. There is nobody who shares my interests. To me, it feels like you are either a jock and popular or you are a nothing. I feel caught in the middle.

That's how it feels. I am half fish and half bird. I love to play sports but, just as much, I like to do the performing arts.

Should I pick between my two ways of life? Or, should I stay how I am? I can find very few who are like me. I feel lonely in this world.

I suppose that I should go on being half fish and half bird. I only have one life and I want to get the most out of life.

If you just swim you have one view of life and if you fly you have a different one. If you see both views, you have more than any others do.

**1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 5 / 3**

Who Am I?

Every summer I go to Gloucester, Massachusetts. I have many friends there who make me feel more like myself.

When I am with them we act, sing, dance, and much more. When I do this I feel like that's all there is.

Occasion for reflection

Every summer I start to wonder. Who am I? Am I the performing arts type? When I am home people seem too different. There is nobody who shares my interests. To me, it feels like you are either a jock and popular or you are a nothing. I feel caught in the middle.

Reflection grounded in occasion

That's how it feels. I am half fish and half bird. I love to play sports but, just as much, I like to do the performing arts.

Metaphoric use of language

Should I pick between my two ways of life? Or, should I stay how I am? I can find very few who are like me. I feel lonely in this world.

I suppose that I should go on being half fish and half bird. I only have one life and I want to get the most out of life.

If you just swim you have one view of life and if you fly you have a different one. If you see both views, you have more than any others do.

Analyzes ideas by moving through successively deeper layers of meaning

Concludes with an abstraction that has grown naturally out of the preceding reflection

Score Point 5

In this piece the writer uses a brief reference to an experience - her summers in Gloucester - as an occasion for reflection. Using this experience, she reflects on her own identity, exploring the question of "Who am I?" through successively deeper layers of meaning. At the end, she arrives at a more abstract reflection that applies to people in general, not just to herself. Her insight deepens as she reflects, so that by the end of the essay she has discovered a new truth about identity.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

Life Does End

...I remember the day when I was in the first grade and I woke up in the morning just like I did every morning, by hearing my radio. But this morning was different. If in the slightest way it was different. It was just too quiet. That morning was one of the worst mornings in my life. It was the morning that my family's cat died. I was the last one to know about it but I was the only one that didn't believe it. I remember running down the stairs and jumping the last three, hoping that it wasn't true that it was a joke. But when I got down and looked in his cat bed he was just lying there doing nothing not even breathing. He was dead.

...That day I learned something. I learned that life does end and that it doesn't matter how much you love someone because someday it's going to end. I lost my best friend that day and there was nothing I could have done about it.

... This idea broadens to become things will always end. That you can't be the best forever. That you can't stop things from changing. I've seen fads change, people change, and lives change.

...That day I learned something that was hard for me. I learned that life changes for better and for worse. I have learned to live without the friendship that my family cat gave me. I changed and made new friends so maybe this change was for the better.

Standard 1.12
Grade 5 Personal Essay
Score 4 / 3

Life Does End

...I remember the day when I was in the first grade and I woke up in the morning just like I did every morning, by hearing my radio. But this morning was different. If in the slightest way it was different. It was just to quiet. That morning was one of the worst mornings in my life. It was the morning that my family's cat died. I was the last one to know about it but I was the only one that didn't believe it. I remember running down the stairs and jump the last three, hoping that it wasn't true that it was a joke. But when I got down and looked in his cat bed he was just lying there doing nothing not even breathing. He was dead.

Occasion for reflection is an account of experience

...That day I learned something. I learned that life does end and that it doesn't matter how much you love someone because someday it's going to end. I lost my best friend that day and there was nothing I could have done about it.

Writer reflects on how the cat's death affects him. Reflection is firmly tied to occasion.

... This idea broadens to become things will always end. That you can't be the best forever. That you can't stop things from changing. I've seen fads change, people change, and lives change.

Reflection moves through successively deeper layers of meaning

...That day I learned something that was hard for me. I learned that life changes for better and for worse. I have learned to live without the friendship that my family cat gave me. I changed and made new friends so maybe this change was for the better.

Concludes by synthesizing experience in a way that emerges naturally from preceding reflection

Score Point 4

In this piece the occasion of the cat's death becomes a springboard for reflection on the inevitability of change and of things coming to an end. The writer explores this abstraction by reflecting through successively deeper layers of meaning and concludes with a new understanding that maybe this change was for the better.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

Play Reflection

I really enjoyed acting in the play “A Mid-summer Nights Dream” because I got to learn my part and sing, and dance. Further more I got to get over my stage fright, and to get to be with the sixth graders more.

In some parts of the play I was afraid, but once someone told me something I really got back in character.

For me this was a really good experience because, I got to be someone who is nothing like me. I go to get on stage and be in character, and then get out of character and be me. my character was a mean sort of person and it was kind of hard to play my character when I am nothing like my character.

In this play there was a lot of singing and dancing. I really enjoy singing so it was a lot of fun.

To me acting is letting out what you really like about being in front of people, and to learn more about your characters and the person who wrote the play. If I had a chance to redo this play I would leave it the same as it always was.

In all I would say that singing and dancing is a lot of fun when you are acting. It is more fun when you are with your friends!

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 3 / 3

Play Reflection

I really enjoyed acting in the play “A Mid-summer Nights Dream” because I got to learn my part and sing, and dance. Further more I got to get over my stage fright, and to get to be with the sixth graders more.

Refers to occasion for reflection (acting in play)

In some parts of the play I was afraid, but once someone told me something I really got back in character.

For me this was a really good experience because, I got to be someone who is nothing like me. I go to get on stage and be in character, and then get out of character and be me. my character was a mean sort of person and it was kind of hard to play my character when I am nothing like my character.

Reflects on experience from a variety of angles

In this play there was a lot of singing and dancing. I really enjoy singing so it was a lot of fun.

To me acting is letting out what you really like about being in front of people, and to learn more about your characters and the person who wrote the play.
If I had a chance to redo this play I would leave it the same as it always was.

Attempts a broader reflection

In all I would say that singing and dancing is a lot of fun when you are acting. It is more fun when you are with your friends!

Score Point 3

In this piece the writer uses her experience in a play as a springboard for reflection on the experience of acting. Overall, the reflection seems to follow questions the writer was asked about the experience (why she like it, what she would change, etc.) rather than a natural progression of ideas. The writer seems to be explaining rather than exploring.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

My Teddy Bear

Seven or eight years ago my Aunt Judy and Uncle Dick came up for christmas. They brought presents for everyone.

The minute my mom said we could open presents I attacked the present they brought me.

I was so surprised. It was a teddy bear dressed in a red sox uniform.

I slept with it every night.

It reminded me of my mom because she is special too. The bear is special because I got it from my aunt and uncle. My mom is special because she is my mom.

Whenever I got sad I ran up to my room and sat with my bear or held it.

This bear is special to me and I will probaly have it for many more years so I can give it to my children.

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 2 / 3

My Teddy Bear

Seven or eight years ago my Aunt Judy and Uncle Dick came up for christmas. They brought presents for everyone.

***Occasion for reflection
described in simple language***

The minute my mom said we could open presents I attacked the present they brought me.

I was so surprised. It was a teddy bear dressed in a red sox uniform.

I slept with it every night.

It reminded me of my mom because she is special too. The bear is special because I got it from my aunt and uncle. My mom is special because she is my mom.

***Reflection limited to
superficial generalizations***

Whenever I got sad I ran up to my room and sat with my bear or held it.

This bear is special to me and I will probaly have it for many more years so I can give it to my children.

Score Point 2

This piece uses the Christmas the writer received his teddy bear as the springboard for reflection. However, the reflection on the importance of the bear is very limited, and there is little elaboration and no exploration. The language is simple and generic.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

My Life in the Fith Grade

Hi! my name is S-----, but my friends call me S-----.

I'm ten years old. My hobby is reading. My job is watching my sister C-----. My mom and my teacher expect me to do well in school, and I do.

My favorite subject is Science. My grades are usually A's and B's. All my friends and teachers are nice to me because I'm nice to them. My teachers name is Mrs. C-----.

The End

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 1 / 3

My Life in the Fifth Grade

Occasion presented only in title

Hi! My name is S-----, but my friends call me S-----.

I'm ten years old. My hobby is reading. My job is watching my sister C----
-----, My mom and my teacher expect me to do well in school, and I do.

No evidence of reflection

My favorite subject is Science. My grades are usually A's and B's. All my
friends and teachers are nice to me because I'm nice to them. My teachers name is
Mrs. C-----.

Simple, generic language

The End

Score Point 1

This piece is really a list of facts the writer is giving about herself. There is no reflection on the information. In addition, the language is simple and generic, with little sentence variety.

Conventions 3

This piece shows grade-level control of conventions.

This is a sad event

Two months ago my cat Harley died. When I went to work. He got hit by a van and when my Aunt Katie told me. When I got out of the truck I cried for at least 2 hours. Then I had to go to my school and I told my friends. They felt sorry for me. I went home and bared him and it was next to my cousin's cat peach and that's it.

The reason why this death was so hard because I was so attached to my cat. That the reason this death was so hard. I spent a lot of time with Harley and I love my cat.

1.12 Personal Essay
Grade 5
Score 1 / 1

This is a sad event

Two months ago my cat Harley died. When I went to work. He got hit by a van and when my Aunt Katie told me. When I got out of the truck I cried for at least 2 hours. Then I had to go to my school and I told my friends. They felt sorry for me. I went home and bared him and it was next to my cousin's cat peach and that's it.

Occasion described in simple language

The reason why this death was so hard because I was so attached to my cat. That the reason this death was so hard. I spent a lot of time with Harley and I love my cat.

Limited reflection in the form of a simple statement without elaboration

Score Point 1

This piece is a high "1", not quite as good as "My Teddy Bear," the benchmark for "2." It uses very simple, basic language to describe the occasion for reflection (the death of the cat) and the reflection itself (how hard the death was for the writer). Although the writer clearly feels deeply about the cat's death, there is very little reflection and no elaboration.

Conventions 2

This piece shows inconsistent control of conventions. In a very short piece, there are two sentence fragments, capitalization errors, and scattered other errors.